

# Ford's \$25-Million (Limit) Man

By Judy Bachrach

There's a grayness to it now. The big, big money of '72 is gone and with it the attendant well-fed hubris, the dazzle, the parties, the splash, dimmed by a \$25-million spending limit.

There is in fact a rather touching humility to campaign '76.

"I know, I know," Jim Baker smiles shyly up at a volunteer. "I know you want to do everything you can for us. But if your expenses go over \$500, they become our expenses."

James A. Baker III, a man of limited political and governmental experience, a Houston lawyer, is heading Gerald Ford's campaign in a low-slung, low-key fashion that is the embodiment of the administration he is trying to vindicate with a second term.

Like Ford, he never sought the office he now occupies—in fact, he rather shied away from it. Like Ford, he finds himself the hapless heir of the Watergate legacy, that long cold shower dousing nascent enthusiasm.

And so there are no fireworks here. Jim Baker's roots are in Texas, which works its will on his inflections, but there is in him none of the brashness, the bravado one associates with the breed. He is a courtly, thoughtful man, more Southern than Western in behavior, and he dresses in gray suits with the skinniest lapels. Jim Baker writes notes to himself on odd slips of paper, and one of them reads: "We have NOT lost momentum. Look at polls. Three OUTSTANDING weeks. One not as good."

Ask Jim Baker, as one TV interviewer did last week, if in his heart he thinks Gerald Ford will win, and he'll talk about closing "the gap." He will praise the "momentum" or point to his own "optimism." He'll say "I wish

I had a crystal ball." He'll say "A lot of things could happen..."

But there's one thing he did not say. Jim Baker didn't say flat-out that yes, Gerald Ford will win.

(Conversation between two staffers on the Ford Committee)

"How am I supposed to get 16 million Italian votes with no media budget?"

"Just tell them Jimmy Carter called them 'Eye-talians.'"

"How am I supposed to get their votes?"

"I told you, just tell them Carter called them 'Eye-talians.'"

"They already know Carter calls them 'Eye-talians.'"

The way they seem to get their jollies over at Ford campaign headquarters is through Jimmy Carter. Stuck to typewriters of several secretaries: GRITS AND FRITZ? NUTS! Tacked to assorted walls are variations on the Playboy Bunny theme. Pasted on a door: REPUBLICANS MAKE BETTER LOVERS. Pinned to a blouse: I DON'T WORK FOR PEANUTS.

And in Jim Baker's own small office, the latest Penthouse ad lounges around. It shows Carter gazing into a mirror and finding the reflection of... Richard Nixon.

It is as if they all manage to find a cause, a determination, not so much in opposing Carter, but in laughing at him.

Like many Texans, Jim Baker used to be a Democrat. His late wife and the present Mrs. Baker used to rib him about that. "His wife and I used to kill him for it," says Susan Baker. "We just gave him a fit."

"I got religion from George Bush," says Jim Baker with a slight smile. The present director of the CIA is a particular friend of his; when Bush was running for the Senate back in '69, he asked Baker to become his Harris County chairman at which point Baker "thought it only appropriate to vote Republican in the primary." It was Bush who recommended Baker to Rogers Morton, which resulted in the lawyer's leaving Houston and becoming Under Secretary of Commerce more than a year ago.

It was also Bush who convinced Baker he had to become chief delegate hunter when Ford asked him to do it back in the dog-days of the nomination. "I could identify with a lot of those delegates," says Baker, "from the South and Southwest and maybe the mountains... I saw my job as one of building an organization." So Baker tried to find out "whose judgment was most respected by a particular delegate—his neighbor's, his governor's or the President, himself." And there's one thing you've got to give his system. It worked.

In Baker's office there is a picture of Rogers Morton, his two-time boss, and it is one of the milder ironies of the campaign that Baker now has his friend's job. But the successor says that's the way his predecessor, who's now stumping about the nation for Ford, wanted it.

For 18 years Baker was a Houston lawyer, the great-grandson of one of the founders of the revered law firm of Baker & Botts. His family, in other words, never hurt for money. But Baker says:

"I owe my father a great deal of gratitude because he kept my nose to the grindstone. I saw a lot of my friends hurt because they had too much too soon. But after law school (at the University of Texas) I lived with my wife and my 1-year-old son on \$160 a month, which was my veteran's paycheck."

Because of a nepotism rule, Baker never joined Baker & Botts; he hooked up instead with Andrews, Kurth, Campbell and Jones, Texas' fifth-largest law firm.

A lot of guys get a great kick out of doing these registration statements for the SEC," he recalls. "Well after you do it a while, well you're sort of doing them in your sleep."

Baker reconsiders, then says, "But I find the law a very rewarding and challenging profession."

This considered addendum is really quite typical of Baker; no hasty words subject to the kinds of misinterpretation that were the bane of Morton. "Anything I do, I do on the record," he informs another reporter. "So they can't point to me and say, 'That guy is leaking stuff.'"

But the 7:30 a.m. executive conference, for instance, is generally off the record. It is a well-organized meeting among people like Bill Greener and treasurer Roy Hughes, and Bob Visser, their attorney, during which they discuss ballot security and "second priority states" and the auditing requirements of the new Federal election laws. And considering the hour, it is also a pretty frugal meeting.

Coffee but no doughnuts.

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"The fact that good fr love is a major miracle," declares Susan Baker. "I really wish it could happen to everyone."

Susan Baker, married these last three years to her husband, has known him all her adult life and was very friendly with Baker's first wife. But Mary Stuart Baker died of cancer in 1970, leaving the widower with four sons. And Susan Baker, a Catholic with three children, divorced her own husband, who later died of acute pancreatitis. And so the Bakers have, aside from their long friendship, a good deal of suffering in common.

Of his own experience with his first wife's illness, Baker says, "It sounds hard to say that it was a hard thing to live through. But it is hard to see it through the eyes of the kids."

"She was very, very brave. I think she knew she was dying, although we didn't handle it the way some people say you should."

"You know they say you should immediately confront it and talk about it. But we didn't, and I think we handled it the right way."

And of the years that followed her failed marriage, Susan Baker says, "I hated being alone those four years. But everybody kept saying, 'You and Jim have to get married . . . ' Poor man, they wanted to marry him off. But Jim and I prayed for a long time before we married. I promise you I would slide down on my knees. I was also given a proverb: 'Reverence for the Lord makes the days grow longer . . . '"

Susan Baker found her family had grown from three to seven children when she remarried—three of them simultaneously in the seventh grade.

"A lot of things could annoy me. But when I married Jim, I said, 'Okay, oh Lord. I want to live life in Your will.' It's my job to be adaptable as a human, as a mother. I said, 'I've tried to run my own life and failed . . . I want to tell you major miracles happen in my life. When I ran five car pools a day He held time in suspension . . . '"

"At the height of the delegate thing," Baker's aide Pete Roussel recalls, "there was some crisis the Sunday before the convention. And everybody was saying, 'Where's Baker? Where's Baker?'"

"Well he'd gone to church with his wife—High Mass."

"And when he returned, his old serene self, I said, 'Where the hell were you?' And he said, 'I've tried everything else except praying for it.' And I said, 'Did it work?' And he said, 'We'll find out Wednesday.'"

madness, Baker was dubbed "the Miracle Man." Roussel says "it was a low-key kind of thing," and one can't imagine it otherwise with Baker.

Before the convention, they were 33 points behind, as Baker never tires of saying. There were egos crashing wildly into each other, as he avoids saying. But the egos persist. John Connally, word has it around headquarters, was miffed when he wasn't invited to the White House with other Ford advocates.

At 2 p.m. Roy Hughes is in Baker's office discussing finances, assuring his boss they're in good shape. For every \$2 the Carter folks are spending on media, Ford people will be spending \$3 in these last days. But it sure isn't what it was in '72.

"In the old way of campaigning with (minority groups)," says Hughes, "we'd spend \$5,000 to \$10,000 on a cocktail party. Well we don't have 'em now and we don't need 'em."

What Baker says next, he says with-

out remorse, because he basically believes that there should be equal limits on spending. But what Baker says next could easily sum up the entire campaign—both campaigns, in fact.

"No one," says Jim Baker, "on this campaign rides first-class."

Note from a Der Spiegel reporter in first-class to Jim Baker, traveling tourist. It accompanies a bottle of champagne:

"We the working press, not restricted by federal election law regulations and other red tape and pursuing in a first-class manner our commercial interests do greet you. And send you this token of our sympathy."

"Is there really any effect on the current presidential campaign from some second-class reports on our economic situation?"

"Or do you like it back there?"



James A. Baker III by Gerald Martineau —The Washington Post